

Baucus thinks universal

By NOELLE STRAUB - Lee Washington Bureau - 02/14/07

Senator touts health care for all

WASHINGTON — Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., on Tuesday called for universal health coverage for all Americans, starting with signing up every newborn at the hospital.

Baucus said a “new season” has arrived in the national health-care debate that will allow for sweeping changes to the system.

“Conventional Beltway wisdom has it that the politics of health care dictate that only incremental changes are possible,” Baucus said in a speech to the National Health Policy Conference. “I disagree. For health care, the season of incremental change is coming to an end.”

As chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over health programs like Medicare and Medicaid, Baucus said he would start the new dialogue. He acknowledged that sweeping reform would take time, adding, “I am in it for the long haul.”

In the meantime, Baucus said his panel will take action this year on some specific issues.

Those include improving and expanding the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, providing help for small businesses to provide health coverage, increasing oversight of the Medicare prescription drug benefit, allowing the government to negotiate drug prices and reviewing the Medicare Advantage program.

Baucus said the Finance panel will hold a series of hearings and roundtables on health care issues to “plant the seeds of an informed dialogue.”

In calling for universal coverage, Baucus said individuals should be responsible for getting coverage but that society should help those who do not have the means to buy it.

About 47 million Americans, including nearly one in five Montanans, don’t have health insurance, he said.

Neither the employer-based system nor the individual market can provide enough coverage, Baucus said. Instead, he believes large numbers of individuals and small businesses should be allowed to pool together in order to purchase group coverage at reduced rates.

Pools must be a partnership between federal and state governments and the private sector, and would require rules on rates and subsidies and careful regulation, he said.

Baucus does not favor a single-payer system but says that employers, individuals and government must all work together to establish universal coverage.

The rate of growth of health care costs must be reduced, he said, adding, “I do not have a magic solution.” Possible ways to lower costs include investing in health information technology, boosting research on which treatments work effectively and tying payments to quality of care, he said.

The health system must also focus more on prevention, he added, such as covering all immunizations and fighting obesity.

At the end of his speech, in which he quoted Marcel Proust, Victor Hugo and Alexander Pope, Baucus took questions.

In response to one inquiry about raising the age of retirement for Medicare, Baucus said he wouldn't take it off the table. But he said he would rather focus on the program's "underlying problems" first.